A KISS FOR CURTENTY[1]

By ARNOLD BENNETT

Mr. Curtenty lay in bed in the winter morning darkness and reflected upon the horrible injustice of destiny. Mr. Curtenty was a most respectable gentleman — indeed a connection of the celebrated Jos. Curtenty of Longshaw, and, be it admitted, a great deal more dignified than Jos. ever was. He had never done anything wrong; his conscience was sinless. In sixty years his dignity and his respectability had not been even compromised. He could, and he did, look everybody unyielding in the face. By nature and long practice he was intensely proud and independent. All the world addressed him as "Mr." Once he had lost a situation through his employer omitting the "Mr." Of course he had not openly resented the omission, for he was not a fool, but the omission had put him in a frame of mind favorable to quarreling, and a quarrel about some trifle had ensued. Nevertheless he had soon obtained a new situation, which unhappily he had lost through the death of the new employer.

Since that disaster — now rather more than a year ago — he had been workless and therefore wageless. Society seemed to blame him for being sixty years old. The fact that he had no particular trade also counted against him. He had always had posts such as watchman, doorkeeper, time-keeper, inspector — posts which meant doing nothing with dignity. Hence no doubt his feeling of superiority to people who actually did things.

Somehow he could scarce hide this feeling — even from his daughter's husband, who secretly resented it. Jim Crowther was a young miner living at Longshaw, and, in the opinion of Mr. Curtenty, Jim's wife Harriet had mar-

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ried beneath her. Mr. Curtenty was mistaken in supposing that he had concealed this opinion from Jim and Harriet. Every week he disliked Jim and Harriet more and more, because they were contributing to his subsistence. They were not so crude in their methods of charity as to give him money direct. Certainly not. Such clumsiness would have made an everlasting breach between the two generations. Mr. Curtenty knew naught, officially, of any help. Only it invariably happened that when Mr. Curtenty had not a shilling Mrs. Curtenty had ten shillings or so, which she produced as it were apologetically. Mr. Curtenty was diplomatic enough never to inquire whence she had obtained the money. Thus the twelve lean months had run precariously and unsatisfactorily on.

But a crisis was now upon Mr. Curtenty. For his wife had told him that Harriet had told her that Jim had told Harriet that Mrs. Curtenty could go and live with the Crowthers at Longshaw if she liked, and Mr. Curtenty too. And little by little Mr. Curtenty was given to understand that either he must submit to this humiliation or starve. Well, Mr. Curtenty had his pride, and he swore to himself that he would not submit to it. He simply could not imagine himself as a helpless pauper, dependent in the home of his son-in-law. He conveyed his decision to Mrs. Curtenty, and the next thing he heard was that if he wouldn't go she would! Ah! He saw well enough that the notion was to force him into submission!

Two days previously, it being then a Wednesday, Mr. Curtenty had been informed that Mrs. Curtenty would migrate to Longshaw at the end of the week — Saturday. It was now Friday. The supreme catastrophe was indeed shaping. All his life Mr.Curtenty had worried about the future, and his relatives and acquaintances had laughed at him for worrying. But was he not justified by the event? Had he ever been wrong? They twitted him about being miserly. He was not miserly. He had always been careful, and was he not now justified of his carefulness also?

Financially, there was the matter of the Post-Office Savings Bank account. They did not positively accuse him of keeping a private hoard in the Post-Office Savings Bank; but they hinted at it, and no amount of denials would stop their hints.

His ear caught a *puff-puff-puff-puff*, the same being the first irregular coughings of the engine of Clayhanger's Steam Printing Works, which extended from Duck Bank down the opposite side of the lane. These coughings were Mr. Curtenty's morning clock — he had no other, nor watch either. Soon followed the sound of sirens from different parts of the town of Bursley. The hour was seven. Mr. Curtenty slid out of bed from his wife's side and began with deliberation to dress. He did everything with deliberation. He even looked for work — when he looked for it — with deliberation. (But he had an idea that work should look for him.) His nature demanded that he should always have plenty of time in front of him. Time was the basis of dignity; hurry was the enemy of dignity. The first part of his dressing he did in the dark. Then he lit a candle, behind the bed's head, and with a morsel of blacking and an old stumpy brush he softly cleaned his boots — or such poor fragments of them as were left to clean.

A miserable small room, but the totality of Mr. Curtenty's home! Once he had rented a whole house, and could walk from one room to another and go upstairs and downstairs and still be at home. A few pitiable bits of furniture, including the little oil-stove on which his wife cooked their so-called meals! Once she had held sway over a whole kitchen range!

In a dignified way he was sorry for his young and ingenuous, quietly grumbling wife. Not really young, for she was the mother of a mother! But he at thirty had married her at nineteen, and to him she had always remained curiously young. There she lay, on the verge of fifty, and looking to the impartial observer more than

her age — she had had a wearing life; but to him in her tranquil, pathetic sleep she seemed rather like a girl — foolish, reckless, helpless. Yes, he was sorry for her. So she intended on the morrow to migrate to her daughter's at Longshaw, whether he went or not! Unless he yielded, she meant to leave him — leave him to his own devices. It had come to that.

On the old tin tray was just enough bread and dripping and bits of cured fish to last them till the next morning. Thenceforward — the fiat had been issued from Longshaw — there were to be no more supplies. And then what? He knew that his wife was wondering, and Harriet was wondering, and Jim was wondering, what the obstinate, secretive old man would do — what would happen. He alone knew what would happen.

When he had laced his boots under the candle and combed his hair, he extinguished the candle and finished his toilet in the dark. But the dark was now twilight; the earth was revolving as usual and in its revolution bearing Bursley to the dawn. Mr. Curtenty buttoned his greenish jacket, tied an antique woolen muffler round his collarless neck, put on his cap and went forth into Woodisun Lane.

He knew he would be too early. He always was too early. He paced smartly, but with dignity, about Duck Square. A huge tram, packed with people who had work and were going off to do it, rumbled past the Wesleyan Chapel down Duck Bank toward Hanbridge. Mr. Curtenty stamped his feet into the pavement and rubbed his hands, for January mornings are always dank and chill in the Five Towns. Yet while doing this he pretended with dignity not to feel the cold. At last he descried the postman, and returned to the front door of the cottage in which he occupied one room; and he received the postman majestically on the doorstep.

"Good-morning," said the genial postman.

"Good-morning to you," said Mr. Curtenty grandly, and took from the postman a small blue official envelope.

In the privacy of the cottage stairs he opened the envelope. Its contents were quite in order; an authority to withdraw the sum of two shillings and sixpence from the Savings Bank department of the Post Office. Then Mr. Curtenty drew from his breast-pocket a yellow bank-book, which showed that twenty pounds stood to his credit, and he carefully put the withdrawal form within the book and replaced the book in his pocket.

Surely you are not surprised! A prudent man must have something up his sleeve for the last emergencies. Mr. Curtenty had maintained that twenty pounds in reserve throughout a year of privation and humiliation. He had lied about it for a year and more than a year. No matter how terrible a plight you may be in, it is always possible to conceive yourself in a still worse plight. That twenty pounds was Mr. Curtenty's bulwark against the imaginable worse — the fear which had plagued him for forty years. It was the last defense and resource of his independence.

"Where ye been?" asked his waking wife as he reentered their home.

"Getting breath of air," said Mr. Curtenty.

In the evening, about half-past seven, Mrs. Curtenty was lying in bed (for warmth) and Mr. Curtenty was sitting on one of the two chairs, all in the dark, when Mr. Curtenty, after a little shuffling of his legs and scrunching of the chair legs on the bare boards, suddenly rose and felt his way to the door, where his cap and muffler hung on a hook. The pair had had two lean meals and one snack; all the fish was eaten, but not quite all the bread; some tea remained for breakfast. Mr. Curtenty had been abroad once, in the afternoon, and during that period he had cashed the warrant for two shillings and sixpence. Whether or not his wife had gone out in the same interval he did not know. They had scarcely spoken to each other — not from unfriendliness, but from habit. Not a word had been said about the morrow, or Mr. Curtenty's inten-

tion regarding the morrow. Mrs. Curtenty had not dared to challenge him on the great matter. Indeed he could not safely be challenged.

Mrs. Curtenty thought to herself now, as she sometimes remarked to her daughter:

"Things'll work themselves out if you leave 'em alone."

This was her philosophy in face of Mr. Curtenty's terrible estranging dignity and independence. All she said was, as Mr. Curtenty fumbled at the door:

"Where ye going?"

And all he replied was:

"A breath of air."

He left without looking at the companion of his life. Even if he had looked at her, he could not have seen her in the darkness. Still, he might have lit the last inch of candle for a few seconds and looked at her, for the moment was one of farewell after a companionship of thirty years. But his sentimental emotions had been numbed, frozen, by misfortune, by spiritual pride, by privation, by secretiveness, by hidden anger against fate and by self-righteousness. So he just went. He knew that his young wife would fall asleep and stay asleep.

It was a raw night in Woodisun Lane and a muddy.

He had not meant to visit the Free Reference Library in the Wedgewood Institution, but as a measure of precaution he decided to do so. He was at home in that warm refuge of the unemployed, the Wedgewood Institution. The horrid, stuffy, damp smell of the Reference Library delighted his nose. After the usual formalities he obtained Quain's "Dictionary of Medicine," and, taking the thick volume to a desk, he turned over its pages with the deliberate majesty of a vicar searching in the Bible for the lesson appointed to be read.

His brain was absolutely clear. He was not out of his mind, nor out of any part of his mind. Under no circumstances would he migrate to his son-in-law's. His wife might go; she indeed would go; and she would be

happy there, or at least contented. The twenty pounds (less two shillings and sixpence) which he had guarded for an ultimate contingency would be useless to him, because too soon exhausted. He might, of course, fend for himself, all alone, for a time on the twenty pounds; but if he did so his family would know for sure that he had had a secret hoard after all, and he could not bear the revelation; it would too seriously humiliate him. Moreover, when the twenty pounds was gone — what then? Merely the same crucial, unanswerable problem as now! No! He had had enough, and there could be but one answer to the insistent question, "To be or not to be?"

Quain was perfectly explicit: "*The soluble cyanides, more especially the cyanide of potassium, largely used by photographers and by electroplaters, are common articles of commerce, and produce the same deadly results as the acid itself. The fatal dose of prussic acid is the equivalent of less than one grain of the anhydrous acid.*"

Nothing could be simpler to the understanding. He had read it before, but he wished to refresh his memory and so avoid the possibility of blunder. He refrained from proceeding to read about the effect of poison; he had read that also before; it was rather disturbing, sensational.

He closed the stately tome and grandly handed it back across the counter to the pert young thing in a jumper who had dominion there. None could have guessed, as he calmly descended the broad steps of the Institution, that he was solemnly marked out and divided that night from every other soul in the town.

He made his way to Critchlow's in St. Luke's Square. Critchlow was the oldest chemist in Bursley. He knew Critchlow slightly — a sardonic and antique being who would as lief as not sell poison to a customer who he guessed meant to drink it.

Critchlow's, however, was closed. Monstrous that the shop should be closed on that night of all nights! Holl's clock across the Square showed six minutes to eight, and

Critchlow's had no right to be closed until eight. But Critchlow's was closed. The old fellow was allowing himself to become a bit capricious in his latter years.

Mr. Curtenty had purposely driven the transaction as late as convenient, for he desired a deserted, nocturnal town for his mortal work; but he now saw the possibility of having cut the thing too fine. Still, there was Salter's in the Market Place — all on the way to the empty playground, beyond the Town Hall, which he had selected for his end. He walked to the top of the Square and turned to the right where the Market Place was. He had an idea that Salter's kept open till nine o'clock. Salter's was open, and he entered the shop, which happened to be empty — behind the counter as well as in front of it.

Salter's was the new drug-store in Bursley. The interior of the shop had been expensively refurnished from floor to high ceiling. It shone; it glittered; it was orderly; it was the cleanest thing in Bursley; it had an antiseptic, tonic odor; its clock was accurate; it offered chairs, mirrors and a weighing-machine for the use of customers. It displayed more tooth-brushes than a quarter of a century earlier had been employed in the whole of Bursley. Mr. Curtenty was not impressed. He had the native's distaste for and suspicion of all that was showy and that was not ramshackle.

A fine young gentleman, Mr. Salter himself (no apron) appeared from the dark rear of the establishment, glided along the length of the counter and became a note of interrogation to Mr. Curtenty, whose tongue — very surprizingly — clave to his palate and whose throat grew parched.

"I want some Scheele's acid" (the trade name of the anhydrous prussic).

Mr. Salter stared hard at Mr. Curtenty, and Mr. Curtenty, invigorated and challenged by the stare, returned it.

"Photographic work?"

Mr. Curtenty nodded. "Aye!"

"How much?"

"Dun know. Smallish bottle."

"Half a pint?"

"Aye, that'll do."

"I'll get you to sign the poison-book."

"Aye!"

Mr. Salter moved about behind the counter and in a startlingly brief space of time was slapping a salmon-tinted poison label on a corked bottle. (Never within Mr. Curtenty's experience had seconds passed so quickly.) The next instant he had screwed the bottle into a bit of wrapping-paper, and he was in the act of handing it to Mr. Curtenty when an important-looking woman entered the shop and Mr. Salter turned to her with eager yet dignified deference, excusing himself negligently to Mr. Curtenty.

But Mr. Curtenty held the bottle. He held it victoriously; and it was no longer a bottle in a bit of paper — it was a sacred phial, magic, omnipotent, more powerful than man and than God. It held the key to the riddle of the future and the short answer to the arguments of the past. It gave Mr. Curtenty a sense of absolutism, of independence, of dignity, of conquest over earth, such as he had never had. It rendered Mr. Curtenty heroic, magnificent. Already he was leaving earth. He had no interest in earth; he was sick of it, disgusted with it.

He yearned bitterly to be quit of it. He had little or no fear, for fear presumes imagination, and he had little or no imagination. He forgot the teachings of religion and the wrath of God, or, if he remembered them, remembered them only to despise them. He was the supreme egotist. He thought of nobody but himself. He was absorbed in himself. Some faint vision of an inquest flickered transiently through his brain. He sniggered at it and it vanished. He was triumphant. He was a hero, a conqueror, a poet. He was God.

"One and twopence, please," murmured Mr. Salter, between two respectful sentences addressed to the distinguished customer.

"*One and twopence!*" cried Mr. Curtenty, dropping the half-crown which he was holding suspended in midpocket. "*One and twopence!* Why! It hadn't ought to be more than tenpence halfpenny!"

"But I'm afraid it's one and two," said Mr. Salter calmly.

"Not me!" Mr. Curtenty growled with finality, and, dropping the bottle onto the round India-rubber mat intended to receive coins, he walked with fury and grandeur out of the shop.

He muttered things to himself. Did Salter suppose that *he* was going to pay for all the fal-lals and gimcrackery of his new shop? Not him! They called him a miser and skinflint. They might. But fair was fair, and impudence was impudence.

Impudence, that's what it was! Impudence! Let Mr. Salter charge his one and twopence to them as had quarterly bills and wouldn't pay cash. But not to *him!* He knew to a certainty that Freeson, the "cash chemist" in Hanbridge, the great price-cutter, would sell him half a pint of Scheele's acid for tenpence, if not ninepence halfpenny. And to Freeson's he would go. Freeson's did not close until ten o'clock. Freeson was a hard-working man who toiled early and late. Impudence! Impudence!

People passing in the market-place heard and saw Mr. Curtenty muttering and chuntering to himself. He noticed with resentment that he was observed, and walked off in the direction of Hanbridge.

Woodisun Lane is one of the ways from Bursley to Hanbridge. Indeed from Bursley Market-Place it is shortest and the oldest way, but by far the worst way. However, Mr. Curtenty took it, in order by a glance at the window of his home to see whether Mrs. Curtenty was wastefully burning the last inch of the candle. She was not.

The window gave no sign of light. Strange to say, Mrs. Curtenty's thriftiness disappointed him, because he wanted another grievance, he wanted dozens of grievances, to gather into his breast as St. Sebastian gathered arrows.

He had to be content with the one great grievance against Mr. Salter — Mr. Salter who by his rapacity was forcing a determined and desperate man to walk unnecessarily over to Hanbridge on a dank night. Soon, by dint of reflection and savage concentration, the grievance swelled till it filled his whole mind and heart and soul.

Nearly at the top of the hill, at Bleakridge, Woodisun Lane debouches into the main thoroughfare, Trafalgar Road. Somewhat farther on is the football ground, where Bursley had never yet defeated Knype, and then there is a corner upon which had stood for centuries a small earthenware factory — one small factory succeeding another there from Plantagenet times onward. Young Eddie Colclough had recently razed a small factory to the ground and was just finishing the erection of a new one of an experimental type wherein various modern dodges of economic organization were to be tested.

As he passed the building Mr. Curtenty's watchman's nose sniffed the air, in the manner of a tiger sniffing distant blood. Mr. Curtenty became a nose and nothing but a nose; and his grievance and his purpose were equally forgotten. It might be said that Mr. Curtenty had no trade; but that he had a profession was richly demonstrated in that sniffing moment. He sniffed the night-watchman's arch foe — smoke, indicating fire.

He looked at the façade, whose upper windows were still unglazed, and could see no curling wisp of smoke. But he had faith in his nose. Though the gates of the large central archway had not yet been put in place, the archway was stoutly boarded, and Mr. Curtenty could not get through it. He ran along and climbed a rough fence at the side of the factory, and so reached the back, which was less securely protected than the front from marauders.

The next instant he was in the strewn yard. And his nose was justified, for he saw smoke meandering furtively, ominously, from a first-floor window. And his eye detected a faint glow within.

Mr. Curtenty was gloriously alive. The price of Scheele's acid was nothing to him. He was professionally inspired. He was happy in the midst of calamity and conflagration. He knew the first thing to do and the second thing to do and did not hesitate a moment. In a quarter of a minute he was in Trafalgar Road again. A policeman, a policeman, to take charge! But there was no policeman. In the Five Towns, so different from other localities, when you are engaged in the practice of virtue and philanthropy there never is a policeman within a mile; it is only when you happen to be delinquent that policemen spring magically out of the earth. There was nobody except three giggling and shrieking girls, arms mutually entwined round necks, swinging along the oozy pavement. Mr. Curtenty ignored them. But at the corner of the tiny square, in front of Bleakridge's yellow church, burned a real lamp. Doctor Ackerington's, of course! Mr. Curtenty, forgetting dignity, and yet somehow preserving it, ran to the house and violently rang the bell. He rang it three times with increasing violence.

The door opened.

"'Ere! You're in a 'urry," said a stern, fat, middle-aged maid in a cap and apron, as soon as she had satisfied herself that Mr. Curtenty did not belong to the ruling class.

"'Ave ye got the telephone here?" Mr. Curtenty demanded stiffly.

"And if we have, you can't use it!"

"Who wants for to use it? You tell your master or missus as Colclough's new pot bank's afire, and they mun telephone for the fire brigade." And as the maid, startled and impressed and stricken, did not immediately move, he added: "And look slippy!" Then he ran off.

Within the yard of the works once more, he descried in the darkness what looked like a mound of sand. He put his hand into it. It *was* a mound of sand. Seizing one of several buckets which the builder's men had left, he filled it with sand and searched for and found stairs and gingerly mounted them in the black darkness, and guided by his triumphant nose he passed through a corridor and into a large suffocating room, which room was illuminated by the fire.

Planks of wood were just beginning to crackle. With the sand he smothered their ardor. But there was not enough sand. He descended again, with empty bucket, bungled the stairs, fell, hurt his ankle, swore, limped, got more sand, ascended. After three such ascents he had extinguished the fire and was in darkness. But he had seen enough to decide the origin of the fire. The usual thing! Workmen's negligence. They had been bivouacking in the room, they had made a fire in the grateless hearth — one of your sprawling fires — and they had not put it out on leaving. A few embers had reached a plank leaning at a broad angle against the mantelpiece, had patiently attacked the root of the plank — a slow business, but in the end successful; the plank, deprived of its base, had fallen sideways on to a heap of other planks. And so on. Had not the entire place sweated with damp it might have been a heap of ruins at the moment when Mr. Salter's rapacity had driven Mr. Curtenty in the direction of Hanbridge.

Mr. Curtenty, his occupation gone, limped through other corridors and rooms until he saw the light of Trafalgar Road lamps through an unglazed window. He looked out, himself unseen. A crowd, small but increasing, was gazing stolidly up at the façade of the works. It could perceive nothing of interest; it had no impulse to do anything; it merely gazed, in the faint hope of witnessing some terrible catastrophe. No policemen! No fire-engine! A tramcar roared by, unheeding. Mr. Curtenty con-

tinued to look out, proud, patient, invisible, scornful of the crowd. He was triumphant — nearly as triumphant as he had been fifty minutes earlier when he held the sacred phial in his hand. What a world! What destiny!

The expectant crowd in the mire was in due course rewarded by the exciting arrival, from Hanbridge way, of a motor-car full of people — Eddie Colclough, a young newly married wife, and friends. Doctor Ackerington being out, Mrs. Ackerington had telephoned not only to the fire brigade, but to Eddie, who lived at Cauldon, between Hanbridge and Oldcastle. Mr. and Mrs. Eddie were entertaining at dinner two gentlemen and a lady, and, all being young and adventurous, they had instantly decided to leave dinner and come in a body to the scene of the announced conflagration.

Mr. Curtenty, seeing them and guessing that Mr. Colclough must be among them, went downstairs with pain in his ankle. Eddie, followed by Mrs. Eddie and the others, was in the yard almost before him.

"Where's the fire?" Mr. Colclough demanded fiercely, in bewilderment; he was intensely relieved to see no evidence of a fire, but also — rather illogically — annoyed to see no evidence of a fire.

"It ain't anywhere. I've put it out," answered Mr. Curtenty coldly, challengingly.

"And who the devil are you, anyway?" cried Mr. Colclough, who was of an aggressive and hasty disposition.

"Mr. Curtenty's my name," said Mr. Curtenty, "and if you'll come upstairs I'll show ye a thing or two." His tone gave pause to Mr. Colclough, and at the same time allayed Mr. Colclough's rising suspicion of the rumor of fire.

"Strike a match," ordered Mr. Colclough at the dark stairs, feeling vainly in his pockets.

"I dunna' smoke," said Mr. Curtenty grimly.

However, one of the others had an electric flashlight. The six of them stood in the scene of the conflagration, and

heard Mr. Curtenty's description of the great episode — how he was passing, how he gave the alarm, how he sent for the fire brigade, how he used the sand, how he sprained his ankle, and how all's well that ends well — the whole recital being supported by charred timber and the heavy odor of wood smoke.

The ray of the electric flash lighted Mr. Curtenty's smoke-grimed face. The rest of them — the fashionable aristocracy, including two young and beautiful women — were in shadow. Mr. Curtenty's tale was faultless. It extorted admiration — a little unwillingly, perhaps, from Eddie Colclough — but spontaneous enough from the others, and especially from the women.

"Well, here's something for you," said Mr. Colclough, and handed Mr. Curtenty a sovereign.

"Thank ye."

"You must be used to fires," said Mrs. Colclough, smiling warmly.

Mr. Curtenty majestically offered some of his personal history.

"And who are you working for now?" asked Mr. Colclough.

"I'm out of work," said Mr. Curtenty.

Mr. Colclough paused.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Mr. Curtenty."

"Well, look here, Curtenty," said Mr. Colclough, and paused again, as though hesitating in his mind.

Mr. Curtenty did not repine at the rough, careless omission of the "Mr." Experience had been teaching him.

"Look here, Curtenty. There's no watchman here yet. Do you want a job?"

Mr. Curtenty was engaged on the spot.

Suddenly he hurried from the room. The others followed him. The electric torch lighted him from behind. His ears had been copying the excellent example of his

nose. He reached one of the front unglazed windows and put his head through a square. A fire-engine had arrived with an enormous fluster and buster and glint of brass helmets. A fine effort on the part of the Bursley Fire Brigade — forty minutes! Mr. Curtenty bawled angrily, disdainfully, to the brigade.

"It's out. Get away with yer sprinklin'-machine. It's out, I'm a-tellin' on ye!"

Then he turned and faced the flashlight.

"You perfect *duck!*" exclaimed young Mrs. Colclough, and — carried away by gratitude for a great deed and her youthful sentimentalism and the general influence of a honeymoon and the comicality of Mr. Curtenty's dirty tweed cap — in all her beauty and all her finery she put her ringed hands on the shoulders of the old man and kissed his sooty plain face.

In Duck Square (which is really only a bit of Duck Bank and not a square at all) there is an establishment (not to be confused with the Borough Dining-rooms two doors off) which stays open till a late hour nightly, brilliantly lit amid the surrounding gloom, and which exudes from its interior an odor so appetizing and powerful that it has been known to interfere with the Wednesday evening prayer-meeting in the Wesleyan Chapel a hundred yards away on the opposite side of Trafalgar Road.

Mr. Curtenty entered this establishment and, pulling half-a-crown from his pocket, bought two plenteous portions of the finest fried fish. He then bought a candle, though candles were not in her line of business, from the white-clad proprietress, who gave him a few matches into the bargain. Then he went across to the fast-closing Dragon Hotel and in the nick of time bought a bottle of beer. Having unlocked the door of the cottage in Woodisun Lane with his own key, he took off his boots at the bottom of the stairs, struck a light, and proceeded upward, heavily encumbered, into his one-room home.

Young Mrs. Curtenty was fast asleep — the blaze of

the candle did not awaken her. He examined her face with a new interest. His heart was loudly beating (but that, of course, was the effect of the stairs — what else could it be?). He was vaguely aware, too, of a nonfleshy throbbing, a quaking, a half-pleasant, half-frightening general disturbance in his mind or his soul or somewhere. He could not quite surely identify the phenomenon. It might have been some imperfect realization of the dread fact that but for the accident of a fire he would at that moment have been somewhere else or nowhere at all and nothing at all. On the other hand it might be due to alarm at his own wild and reckless expenditure in the fried-fish shop and the Dragon Hotel.

It was the heavenly odor of the fried fish that first caused his wife to dream a delicious dream and then woke her. As her senses gradually brought her back into the sphere of reality, she opened her ingenuous eyes and saw Mr. Curtenty bending over her, candle in hand. The memory of Mrs. Colclough's kiss was now the chief thing in Mr. Curtenty's mind. It somehow thrilled him, and it somehow took thirty years off Mrs. Curtenty's age.

"Rally thysen up," said Mr. Curtenty in a tone so startlingly new and attractive to Mrs. Curtenty that she could not move.

He wanted to bend down and embrace her, but was prevented by an unconquerable complex that held him fast and told him not to be ridiculous.

"Rally thysen up," he repeated, "and put the blanket round thy shoulders."

"Jimmy," said she hopefully, "then us'll go to Harriet's at Longshaw to-morrow?"

"Not me!"

"I shall," she said sadly. "They'll make me. Aye, lad! I'm going, I am!" She sighed.

"Thee isna'," he almost shouted. "I've gotten a job. Rally up and set this 'ere fish on a platter."

She raised herself on her elbows and kissed him — *she*

had no forbidding complex. The kiss was what he wanted. This kiss was the second in one hour, and the second in perhaps six months or more. And the lips were cool and fresh as Mrs. Colclough's. And the kiss had a quality mysteriously surpassing that of Mrs. Colclough's.

Mr. Curtenty felt himself obliged for form's sake to show impatience at the salute.

"'Ere," he grunted. "Thou'rt shakin' candle-grease all o'er th' bed."

Nevertheless he himself adjusted the blanket round his wife's exposed arms and neck.

ARNOLD BENNETT

THE novel-reading public is as intimately acquainted with the Five Towns of Arnold Bennett's stories as with the Wessex of Thomas Hardy or the Sussex of Sheila Kaye-Smith. In one of these North Staffordshire towns Mr. Bennett was born in 1867 and there spent his early life. After a brief time devoted to the study of law, Mr. Bennett adopted journalism as a profession, and has since become one of the best-known as well as one of the most prolific English writers. Novels, short stories, plays, newspaper and magazine articles, books on self-improvement have flowed from his pen unceasingly. A favorite literary controversy rages about the question of Arnold Bennett's rank as an artist; one critic accuses him of "pot-boiling" to the detriment of his art; another calls him a great realist with a keen insight into the deeper meanings of life. This question we may leave the critics — and the next hundred years — to settle. In the meantime, if the reader wishes to know more of Arnold Bennett, let him read *Tales of the Five Towns*, a collection of stories, and *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*, two of his best novels.

The story which has been selected for his volume is one of Mr. Bennett's very recent tales of the Five Towns. While it lacks somewhat the repression of style which characterizes his best work, it lacks also the grimness of such stories as *The Idiot* or *A Letter Home*. Its charm lies in the unusualness of the situation; a stolid, taciturn man sets forth to end his life, walks from shop to shop in search of a bargain in Scheele's acid, meets fate in the smell of fire, has the suppressed romance in his soul

quickened to life by a kiss, and goes home to his wife bearing gold and frankincense and myrrh in the form of a job and hot fried fish with a bottle of beer from the Dragon Hotel.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. The Five Towns which Arnold Bennett has made his own particular field are pottery-manufacturing centers in northern England. Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, Longshaw, and Turnhill — these are the names in thin disguise of five towns in which pottery spells life for the inhabitants. Bursley, in which our story takes place, "prided itself on possessing a unique dignity as 'Mother of the Five Towns,'" Hanbridge, toward which Mr. Curtenty was walking when he scented the fire, was the Chicago of the Five Towns, "a bit doing there, by all accounts." The Honorable Joseph Curtenty of Longshaw, to whom our Mr. Curtenty was related, appears in another of Mr. Bennett's stories. Dignity and respectability must have run in the Curtenty family. The Honorable Joseph "was Deputy-Mayor, and Chairman of the General Purposes Committee of the Town Council; he was also a Guardian of the Poor, a Justice of the Peace, President of the Society for the Prosecution of Felons, an Oddfellow, and several other things that meant dining, shrewdness, and good-nature." Clayhanger's Steam Printing Works on Duck Bank, which waked Mr. Curtenty with its siren, is well-known to readers of Arnold Bennett's novels.
2. The story opens when "a crisis was now upon Mr. Curtenty." What was this crisis? How had the crisis been precipitated by the fact that Mr. Curtenty was "by nature and long practice intensely proud and independent?" How has he been secretly preparing for such a crisis? Do you suspect his purpose when he visits the Free Reference Library? Is it probable that a man planning such a tragic act would clean his "poor fragments" of boots before going out? Is the incident at Salter's Pharmacy consistent with what we already know of Mr. Curtenty? Tell the story of the fire in Colclough's pottery. How does the conclusion of the story satisfy you?

3. In studying the character of Mr. Curtenty discuss the significance of the following sentences —
   a. "All the world addressed him as 'Mr.'"
   b. "He even looked for work — when he looked for it — with deliberation."
   c. "But he at thirty had married her at nineteen, and to him she had always remained curiously young."
   d. "It might be said that Mr. Curtenty had no trade; but that he had a profession was richly demonstrated in that sniffing moment."
   e. "The memory of Mrs. Colclough's kiss — somehow thrilled him, and it somehow took thirty years off Mrs. Curtenty's age."
4. In another story Mr. Bennett speaks of the temperament of the Five Towns as a "fearful and strange compound of pride, obstinacy, unconquerableness, romance, and stupidity." Can you prove from the story that Mr. Curtenty possessed any of these qualities?
5. The English hate to be caught in the act of showing sentiment. Read *The Inconsiderate Waiter*, by Barrie, and see how this national characteristic dictates the London clubman's story as well as it explains Mr. Curtenty's words, "'Ere! Thou'rt shaking candle-grease all o'er the bed." How does Galsworthy's story in this collection emphasize this trait?
6. The experience at the fire provided sentimental young Mrs. Colclough with a good story. Try writing her account as she would give it at her next dinner party.

Other stories by Arnold Bennett:
The Idiot
The Dog
A Letter Home
From one Generation to Another